

## STRANGERS TO THEMSELVES: AN EXPONENT OF COLONIAL NEUROSIS IN *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

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### ABSTRACT

Indian English Literature has created a niche for itself at literary world stage and Kiran Desai needs no introduction for her pre-eminent works. Her novel *Inheritance in Loss* (2006) has been applauded immensely and conferred upon Booker's prize to further strengthen the belief that authors hailing from Indian origin have a lot to offer across-the-board and in *Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai is unrivalled at multiple fronts, creating a motley text which can be read many times to embrace the umpteen issues penned by her in the varied length chapters. Thus, my research paper on her novel *Inheritance of Loss* intends to chart out in its first half the themes and issues starting from nationalist period Indian literature to touching upon issues covering up in post-independent India by another coterie of writers, and thus narrowing it down to highlight the measures by which it can be asserted that the texture of Kiran Desai's fictional novel differs significantly from her preceding generation(s). Kiran Desai narrative uncovers the space in which her characters oscillate from their influential past to arid present.

Every character is so distracted in their approach to life that their identity gets muddled up completely and they remain in their make believe world to maintain their elitist class. Kiran Desai, does not let her characters take basic necessity of approving or disapproving of their stand in any given situation, rather their identity, if any, that has been created in a multicultural society by the impact of globalisation remains unfathomable. While contesting the concomitant neurotic identities of such characters in *Inheritance of Loss*, I have drawn liberally on Bhabha's theory of "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial discourse" in his *The Location of Culture*, and other critics Ania Lomba, Martin Orkin, Sara Upstone and Sunita Sinha's esteemed essays.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Psyche, Mimicry, Imitation, Colonial times, Modern World, Globalization, Eastern World, Western World

### INTRODUCTION

Twentieth century indeed has given many Indian writers a spur to write on national related issues that were dipped in patriotism. Such writers asserted their Indian-individuality and had mostly dealt with the issues that were more to do with morality, humanity and excogitating on development of an erstwhile dependent nation. In those times a tremendous insight in the works of renowned writers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Aurobindo Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu, Mulk Raj Anand, and the list of course is very long, but apparently their oeuvre predominantly dispensed with some specific issues of political ideology of the time. Fag end of the same twentieth century produced another coterie of writers coming largely from affluent class such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul – his identity as an Indian is contested on various grounds, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh who all gave a new impetus in Indian English writing by using antithetical measure as compared to the gone by writers. The textures of the writings of these authors are remarkably diametric to the previous generation of authors that sought independence through the pen. The reason for the deviation between the two generations perhaps can be located within the regime of new sprouted imagination of

exploration of novel identity of an elite Indian individual who despite all the odds, is able to receive good education in Independent India. New found independence and high spirits of young authors and the energy with which they created their content is inexplicably reverse in nature as compared to the earlier writers. They were/are not inciting outward world of an Indian individual seeking independence and covering social issues, rather the rubric of their contexts of lineament spelunk on the subjectivity of an individual vis-a-vis recent history of a nation that had been partitioned. Thus, their corpus becomes the site of two worlds in which immediate history of India is used to color the plot and the characters carved out are usually the embittered ones, who to a large extent remain indifferent to the procedures that had been carried out to procure independence. Explicitly, the narratives of such novels often not engage themselves with the question of the relevance of hard earned freedom that is getting lost because of the lack of direction.

In fact, a chaotic situation of present Indian is replicated in the fiction that might as well suggest that outside India one may find solace, and hence most writers have shifted their base to foreign lands which are still continuing and answer may lie in the "poverty at home that pushed them across the ocean" (Mishra 2007: 2). The contexts of the narratives of Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Kamla Markandya, Rama Mehta, Geeta Hariharan and Anita Desai to name a few women writers, kept their setting as Indian upper class homes and the women protagonists undergoing psychologically turmoil. Usually the narrative would be woven around exploring the inner world entangled with the muddled post colonised history of India which is well received on international arena. At the same time, these Indian women writers' counterpart, the elite men writers were creating a different world for themselves, and therefore it is not difficult to recall when Salman Rushdie's was well accorded for creating magic realism through Booker's prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) and the book was again given Booker's Booker prize in 1994. Quite remarkably, the reconstruction of Indian history in Rushdie's novels does not directly hit or change the life of the characters but it only acts as the catalysis to mold the destiny or the nexus of their relationship with one another. Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor are among the set of the author who draw upon the history or the politics of illustrious incidents of India, their novels are dipped in multi-layered politics bringing out the very essence of utilitarian principles on which their characters are based on. Some of these authors re-constructed the history of India intertwining with personal life of the characters in their novels and moved on to the overarching topical issues.

Alongside positioning Anita Desai's, a writer mother, who was well acknowledged emphatically and was able to create a niche for herself and the coming posterity when twice shortlisted for *Clear Light of Day* (1980) in 1988 and *In Custody* (1984) in 1994. A tenuous divergence is palpable in Anita Desai's works as compared to her synchronic writers, her protagonists often explored on their psychological expansion that has little to do with contemporary issues. In her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), brings forth the dilemma of Maya who is trapped in a bad marriage to Gautama who is much older, *Voices in the City* (1965) is set in metropolitan city Calcutta, she strives to makes her characters appear unusually sensitive towards life incidents and incapable of controlling the mundane associations and failing which, get them killed by not able to reason out their presence in materialistic world. *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971) foregrounds the predicament of Indian immigrants in Britain undergoing the emotional disturbances. *Where Shall we go this Summer* (1975) the protagonist is caught in a sepulcher married life suffocating her to death, to evade from the quotidian life she goes to a forsaken place Manori. Analyzing further her novels such as *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), it comes forth that to a large extent Anita Desai does not touch upon broader issues of her times, past or present, in fact she insists that her "novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character. They are part of my [her] private effort to seize upon the raw material of life – its shapelessness, its meaninglessness" (kumar 2002: 69) and unlike her mother, Kiran Desai's writings cater to "just about every contemporary international

issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism, and terrorist violence" (Vinson 1972:348).

Therefore this paper intends to focus on the characters in *Inheritance of Loss* having fractured nature of identities. The characters are created in such an intense manner that seems so distant but at the same time their vulnerability of embodied situation can be well understood. Kiran Desai maps the broader spectrum of human actions and emotions including Bureaucrat Jemubhai to a small creature like the Cook, a courageous woman Lolita who tries to deal with GNLF men on her own. Not to forget Sai and her love interest Gyan who (un) knowingly becomes an instrument to get the judges house robbed. Kiran Desai's imagination runs through the wider range of issues from multicultural, multilingual, globalization and fascination for the western world when she foregrounds the love of Mr and Mrs Mistry, "each one fascinating as a foreigner to other, but both educated with an eye to the West" (Desai 2006:29). The attraction of western world does not limit to high class people but people as small as "cook's desire for modernity: toaster, ovens, electric shavers, watches, cameras, cartoons colors. He dreamed of at night not in the Freudian symbols that still enmeshed others but in modern codes, the digits of a telephone flying always before he could dial them, a garbled television" (Desai 2006:55). Clearly, all the characters in IHL have directly or indirectly imbued with the western world's lustrous presence on a global map and in the hard ordeal of attaining the unattainable become their sole objective. Kalimpong becomes a site of multifaceted of life wherein every individual coming from all walks of life is combating her/his own aspiration of becoming "un-Indian", as Indianess is despicable. Lola and Noni could feel proud on having heard pixie picking up English accent and supersede Mrs. Sen's daughter hoping to marry an English man 'looking for Indian Girls'.

The younger Desai in that sense is significantly differs from her writer mother, in her Man Booker's prize (2006) winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006); she questions the varied loss her characters face. Desai develops the story of disparate characters by providing them an agency of digging out on lost fame they keep on cherishing in their heart but unable to bring it back in their life and thus experiences the rancid of nostalgia. A confluence of postmodernist technique and postcolonial measures makes Kiran Desai adept at toying with the ideals of power structures of west that are supported and depended on the shoulders of Third World and disruption of which "might upset the balance"(Desai 2006:23). The cook tries to ameliorate the circumstantial conditions of a servant by sending his son in the New York City without considering the proper procedures of immigration and hence his son lands there as an illegal immigrant. Son of the cook, Biju's hardships begin at this juncture as he depletes his time from skirting one place or the other, mostly to evade the cops not for the better prospectus. Alongside goes the story of Sai, an adolescent Indian girl, staying with her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather, a retired judge, in the town of Kalimpong on the Indian side of the Himalayas. The judge's "privileged" past of his association with the British, and he being taught in a British way do not let him forget his false believe in "ideal western methods" and thus in his own homeland India, he turns into a misanthropic.

Very surprisingly judge is one of those "ridiculous Indians," as the novel puts it, "who couldn't rid themselves of what they had broken their souls to learn"(Desai 2006: 205). Excessive absorption in the British ideals is suggestive of his incapability to encounter the corporeality of the present situation, which is a marker of his lost "fame" as a civil servant of colonial regime. Instead of rationalize the upheld position of post-independence Indian, Jemu Bhai Popat Lal Patel gets swayed up in the process of colonization and becomes the distorted silhouette of colonizer. Eccentric Jemu Bhai Keeps oscillating between two positions, one as a colonized man in his past and in the present has learnt to imitate like his western masters. Bhabha theory on postcolonial becomes relevant here as he dwells on the shoulders of such colonial elites who have been marginalized in the west and have often found (his)their own skin odd colored, (his) their own accent

peculiar” (Desai 2006: 40). Drawing upon Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon theory on colonial subject, Jemu’s ambivalent self is a brisance of his encounter with the west and commemoration of the darker side of colonial expedition. The marker of his hybridized form is his reluctance to stay in his homeland- Gujarat, in fact he prefers to live in the foot of Himalayan to evade the extreme weather of India at certain places just the way British used to do. The place chosen here to spent post retirement days becomes the site of the dilapidated self of a hybridized man who hides himself behind a masquerade and mimics like his western masters.

Justice Jemu’s disinterestedness in the life around him and having a condescending view towards his own people ineluctably makes the reader apparently aware that perhaps Jemu himself believes in law and order of the ideal western, where he had spent some time. But Desai would not let this tactile sink in easily as she obstructs the belief by uncovering his past and make assailable to the reader that Jemu largely experienced the darker side of his success. Confirming the unstated regime of colonialism essentialism that no dark skinned individual can ever be submerged in the First World no matter how hard one tries to camouflage one’s skin under clothes “he would never be seen without socks and shoes and would prefer shadow to light, faded days to sunny, for he was suspicious that sunlight might reveal him, in his hideousness, all too clearly” (Desai 2006: 40). By creating a carapace for himself Jemu apparently prefer to live in a sense of denial of his rejection by the First World. Desai, ridicule him while foregrounding Jemu’s self-deceptive methods. Desai also plays with the psyche of Jemu in which he likes to believe that his generosity would only end up revealing the darker side of his truth of he being one of them. The paranoid of such disclosures makes him hate the natives of Kalimpong all the more and he puts in his best effort to create a gulf between him and them. To naturalize the inequality he imitates western masters to such a great extent that in the process his own self gets lost and a muddled Jemu is precipited.

In the West, he could never get along with the western ideals because he was an unwanted there, and his fractured identity as a knowledgeable over “ignorant” natives in Kalimpong would not allow him to live normally. Homi K Bhabha says that “the effect of mimicry is camouflage...It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of being mottled” (qtd. Lacan in Bhabha 1994:85). Desai here makes a point that the character of Jemu Bhai has distortion in it, as colonialism have formally come to an end but it backlashes itself and its effect remains on the psychology of some privileged native who might have attained an agency during the colonial proceedings. Mimicking the “high ideals” of colonial imagination and imbibing them to deep inside their own life, Desai portrays the effects of mimicry that emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge on some of her characters in *The Inheritance of Loss* that are neck deep self-engrossed “with the solace of being a foreigner in his (their) own country” (Desai 2006:29). Perhaps, Desai suggests that Jemu hates natives not because they are inferior to him but he sees his own reflection in them. Adhering to his own identity as a normal Indian running after western culture and belief might as well prove fatal to his controlling power that goads the natives. And thus reified Jemu becomes instrumental in keeping the binaries intact and domicile in post independent India in which belongs to the upper side. In the case of Jemu Bhai “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 1994:86). Bhabha further says that the “discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference mimicry is, thus the sign of double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation, which appropriates ‘ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha 1994:86). “For Fanon, this is a fatal mimicry which leads to a terrible schism between black skin and white masks, to the black subjects disavowal of his roots and his tragic attempts to fashion a European self” (Lomba 1998: 144). Bhabha and Fanon both act as a unifying force to interrogate and re-examine the procedure of colonization that affect the psychology of the colonial subject. Jemu does assumes the position of the master and reiterates

master-slave binary by exercising power on his servant/cook by punitive actions of blaming him of having lost his dog-Mutt, wherein the servant/cook indeed feels guilty as he reckons the episode through the eyes of his master. Apparently the judge – the civilized one, had to inflict pain to the lower class/caste man to find a scapegoat for his own failures in life and that might also help him to remain oblivious to his poignancy on loss of his dear little dog.

Clearly, Desai highlights the shades of an Indian man who is unable to accept his worn out status as a justice serving English that has now reduced to a vulnerable position in which he could not identify himself with either of the world India or England that verifies the ramifications of colonialism on the psychology of the subject. Jhemu's characters peculiarities are not something that are unique to him but unique is the method of Desai, through which she is touching upon the overarching issues of displacement, identity alteration, and bereft of human emotions. Be it Lola, Noni, Biju, Cook or the young Sai- that perhaps is learning to live her life by standards set by the elders. But circumstances turn into her favor and she finds love for a very brief duration in her mathematics tutor that makes her unlike long time spinster Noni. Kalimpong becomes the site of holding divergent issues such as love- hate relationship, insurgency, terrorism, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and globalization that are converging at one point of having experienced and aspired for western ideals.

Desai bespeaks of "loss" of such people who lament the loss of the materialistic authority and hence the solipsism blasts away that come across by the way of "humorous commentary on multiculturalism, globalization, and the post-colonial society in *Inheritance of Loss*" (Sinha 2008: P 131). On the one front, long-suppressed peoples have begun to awaken to their dereliction, to express their anger and despair, the people reluctant to see themselves as postcolonial subject get subsumed in the process of colonization and begin to misbelieve that are now the civilized men on earth, hence start dissociating from the natives. That is the case with Jemu Bhai Popat Lal Patel, he unknowingly becomes an ideological tool of worn out British rule to strengthen the divergence of two cultures that should remain inviolate. For some of Desai's characters, including one of the judge's neighbors in Kalimpong Lola and Noni are no exception to such beliefs and this comes as a distinct shock: "Just when Lola had thought it would continue, a hundred years like the one past — Trollope, BBC, a burst of hilarity at Christmas — all of a sudden, all that they had claimed innocent, fun, funny, not really to matter, was proven wrong" (Desai 2006:241-42). To a large extent majority of characters, in *The Inheritance of Loss* have been affected by their encounters with the West. As a scholar, the judge had to undergo the humiliation of being a wog in racist England, the future judge feels "barely human at all" (Desai 2006: 40). On his return to India, he does not even hate his timid Indian wife but also finds himself trapped in the backward country. Desai very beautifully brings forth the psychology of an Indian who was ostracized by the west and instead of rationalize his position as an Indian, the judge's personality gets distorted by not coming to terms with the rejection of west and hence starts finding solace in his dog, which again symbolizes his narcissism with west.

All the characters of novel and what "binds these seemingly disparate characters is a shared historical legacy and a common experience of impotence and humiliation" (Mishra 2006). Desai, therefore, shows a technical and thematic maturity but also effectively accentuate on intensely felt alienated Indian sensibility and a few consciousness, offering remarkable interpretations of [im]perishable Indian values as well as highlighting our cultural heritage mostly in sharp contrast with Western values. Giving vent to many topical issues and nothing is left behind which is not relevant in the current times such as class conflict, racism, multiculturalism generation gap and everything is penetrated through by highlighting the idiosyncrasies of characters. The cook and Biju, living difficult life at their respective places, try to dupe each other by giving false account of their felicity. The young girl Sai falls in love with Gyan, the mathematics tutor, and he in turn accrues to Nepali uprising. Sai's falling for her tutor seems natural for a sixteen year girl ignorant of her

incompatible individual self as she is being brought up in a house that had once homed Scotsman. Desai circumspectly divulges Sai's disposition of a naïve westernized girl when shows "her hands shaking, stewed tea in a pan and strained it, although she had no idea how to properly make tea this way, the Indian way. She only knew the English way" (Desai 2006 :6). Although Sai did not have a glorious past of having been loved by her parents but while residing in convent had undergone a training of not to appreciate her Indian inheritance, she was taught to learn that "cake was better than laddoos,, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi" (Desai 2006: 30). Desai does not let us travel in her characters psyche but give us enough opportunities to form an impression of them, Sai is been to places and spaces that never came to an individual normally. Once displaced from St. Augustine Convent she reaches to her very unwelcoming maternal grandfather who further reinforces the ideas of being westernized must only be her sole aim when pass the orders that "can's send you to a government school, I suppose you'd come out speaking with wrong accent" (Desai 2006:34). Identity of Sai is not formed by a house conducive enough for the housemates capable of humane love rather; it has been chiselled out with various forces of English-Hindi tussle, being brought by nuns and eventually an "orphan child of India's failing romance with the soviets" (Desai 2006:42). Desai, thus, able to re-direct the issues that have come up lately in terms of watching domestic spaces so much infected by globalization forces that no individual irrespective of its class remained unfazed. Women at Mon Ami living a prosaic living a dull life punctured the 'romantic notions of countryside', for them only solace is to listen to their daughter on BBC with an English accent. Biju's constant change of places are the marker of his unsuccessful attempts to settle in on a foreign lands carrying out menial tasks with constant reprimindation by the owners of the restaurants. Cho Oyu which "might be crumbling, but it had once been majestic" (Desai 2006: 257), fail to create normal human relationship among its inhabitants. In conventional and traditional way home, in the past, has served as a marker of great imperialistic past of British which has been preserved in its literature, but in the contemporary times as Sara Upstone points out in the *Spatial Politics in Postcolonial Novel* in "the postcolonial home functions differently to its colonial predecessor. Filled with disorder and chaos, the postcolonial representation of the home challenges the colonial ideal of domestic space, and powerfully interrogates its status as haven, or location of order. Repoliticised, the home in the postcolonial novel explicitly becomes a space where negotiations of power are played out, illustrating colonial hierarchies as clearly as the nation or city, and where critique of colonialism is clearly possible" (Upstone 2009:124).

Sai falls in love with Gyan, the tutor, and he in turn accrues to Nepali uprising. The *Inheritance of Loss* encapsulates almost every issue of 1980s that is germane in the contemporary time as well. Gyan and his shift of loyalties from Sai to Gurkhaland insurgency evinces that how young minds get carried away with the terrorist activities and the euphoria thus geared up to save the homeland is such that they don't hesitate to rob out the retired judge and the old women. Adhering to the apparent actions of her characters, the younger Desai does not intrude into the subjectivity and private space of the characters, thus she, in no way privileges the actions of characters. Desai, very honestly uncovers the emotional incapability of colonial subjects to come to terms with the loss of their privileged selves during pre-independent India. Whether it is retired judge Jemubhai Patel or Lolita whose husband gets her a place to live on the lines of British standards, fails to discern future hardships of lonely women. Desai, never let herself become sympathetic or take sides of her well drawn characters, rather she let readers decide to see the outer world of them and thus judge their inner world.

## CONCLUSIONS

Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* can be read in myriad ways while considering apparently its unconventional structures of having short and some very short paragraphs, the narrative very swiftly indulges in spatial-temporal shifts

clinging on to sundry geographical locations, for instance, Kalimpong situated at northeastern Himalyas in India, to Biju's America to Jemu's colonial England. Desai very deftly brought two worlds, one the colonial history of India and its impact on her characters vis-à-vis a world that is still very harsh to rob the youth off their dreams while 'works for the Americans'. The colonialism has long gone past ceremoniously in her novel when Desai alludes to 1980s India but, she very expeditiously unearths the ramifications of such colonial collisions on the psyche of her characters. Getting a glimpse into Judge's past encountering with British and their rejection of him in colonial times does not get altered in the modern world, since Biju's hardships remain undone till almost the end while claiming a new life in America. Characters whether it is Justice Jemu, Sai, Noni or Lolita could not come to terms with the lost empire. They choose not to rationalise their position as people having lost their heydays and probably accept the fact that bygone days will not return back in any form. In deep inside their psyche they have polarised the homeland as a dirty world at one end, to much coveted western world on another world thus inflicting more pain on themselves. Their muddled up identities could not belong to any of the world for respite. Imitating and following western ideals in terms of drinking hot chocolates, knorr soups become symbol of fractured nature of identities. At the same time Judge Jemu could not belong to either western or the eastern world as in all veracity sheer luck fell on him that made him a renowned bureaucrat, thus his incapability of accepting his past made him a reclusive. The cook does not also remain neutral to such aspirations of western ideals inasmuch that he passes it on to his son Biju.

Kiran Desai undertakes an endearing task to discern the impact of globalisation and repercussion of colonial history on her characters not as much on the physical locale, as it penetrate through their minds and metamorphose them into shams. Thus, Kalimpong becomes a site of different worlds coming together to collide with each other and changing the lives of its inhabitants forever, Desai un-surreptitiously promulgate the subjectivity of her characters without disturbing, suggesting to her readers what really goes on in their minds, and mostly leaving on readers to establish nuances on all occasions.

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